

[The Stembler Family]

26087

[? ? ?]

Miami, Florida

4,250 Words

January 30, 1939

The Blake Family (white)

348 N. W. 35th Street

Miami, Florida

[Collector?]

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Writer

THE STEMBLER FAMILY

The long, narrow frame house occupied by the Stembler family is built on the rear of the lot and can scarcely be seen from the street because of a row of tall Australian pine trees planted closely together across the front of the lot. Just enough opening is left to walk thru on a stone walk which leads straight to the house. It has always been the desire of Minnie Stembler to have the yard fenced, but at the present time, rocks and shrubbery take the place of a fence along the sides and back of the lot. To the left is a large hibiscus bush;

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a stone bench placed close to it makes a very inviting spot, and during warm weather the young folks spend many pleasant hours there.

Minnie is a great lover of flowers; discarded washtubs and tin cans are used as receptacles for ferns, cuttings, and young plants. These are placed on either side of the three steps which lead directly into the house. A large rose apple tree branches out and reaches to the front door. The house has never been painted.

"The house is so old now, Tom won't paint it because the paint would soak in too fast and cost too much," Minnie said.

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"When we bought the place, 17 years ago, it was just a two-room cottage and Tom kept building on until now we've got six rooms. The house ain't much, but at least it's all paid for. We always hoped to build a real nice house on the front of the lot but we've had all we , would could do so far to raise four girls on the salary Tom earned as collector for the Mayer Furniture Co."

Elizabeth, the oldest daughter is married; Laura, age 22, is engaged to be married; Martha, 20, married two years ago before finishing High School; Anna, 17, is a senior in High School.

I have known the family for a number of years, and as they have never been without at least one dog and cat, was not surprised when a young dog came rushing down the steps to greet me. There is no screen door, and the wooden door was open, so I walked in.

Minnie was sitting in the front room, hand-sewing on a patch-work quilt. "Sit right down and join us," she said. "I know you won't mind me sewing as we talk. Scat," she said to a large cat, that was curled up asleep in a chair, as she shoved him off to make room for me to sit down. A young girl was rocking a baby in the center of the room, and Minnie introduced her as a friend of Martha, her daughter. This front room is seldom without visitors as

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Minnie has many friends, and is always ready to sit down and talk with them, regardless of housework, which is supposed to be done entirely by the girls.

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"The rest of the house ain't 'sade up' go we'll just stay here," is the usual beginning; most of the company just remains there, unless the room gets too crowded, then she will tell the girls to take their company to their own room.

"Martha and Gene are back home again," began Minnie. "Gene is out of a job and they haven't got any money to pay rent, so we let them stay here with us. We don't have too much food, but we are glad to share whatever we have with them. They have had mighty hard luck ever since they got married, though Gene did have a job at first, runnin an elevator. Martha was very anxious to have a baby, and got that way right away, but luck was against her. As you know, I just love children and was lookin forward to becomin a grandmother, but the baby was born too soon and it died. Seems almost as tho it's the Lord's will, I am not to have a grandchild for Martha had another miscarriage after the first baby. She needs an operation now, but lan' sakes, where the money would come from is more than I know - she'd have to go in on charity, I guess, but she's just puttin it off, long as she don't feel too bad. She ain't but 20 so she's got plenty of time.

"Lizbeth's baby, a little girl, died too, you remember, several weeks after birth. Doctor said there was something imperfect about its digestive organs; they kept the baby in the hospital, and did all they could, but couldn't save it. 'Lizbeth can't have any more children, and Martha shouldn't, I guess, but she says she'll 4 keep right on tryin, as she's just crazy for babies—takes after me, I reckon. Remember, when my girls were small, I'd have all the children in the neighborhood here—people used to think I was runnin a kindergarten. Laura ain't very strong, she had a serious operation last year, so I figure it'll be up to Anna to give us the grandchildren.

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“Lizbeth and Bob live in Atlanta now and seem to have better luck than they did in Miami. At least Bob has got steady work, and last time ‘Lizbeth wrote she said she had a job in a candy factory. She is in poor health too, and ought not to be workin.”

Minnie, who doesn't weigh more than 100 pounds, looks like she needs a doctor's care herself. Thin, sallow, and very wrinkled, she looks more than her fifty years; her brownish hair is half gray. She wears it in a motherly fashion pulled straight back and done in a tight knot on the nape of her neck. Her large, expressive blue eyes offset the otherwise drab picture she presents in her faded print dress.

The room in which we were sitting serves as a living room. There are no windows; good sized openings, screened, take the place of windows. Cretonne curtains hang from these. The ceiling is very low, and instead of plaster, the walls are covered with boards. The open space just to the right of the door has been converted into a cage for two canaries by placing another piece of 5 screening on the inside of the window's edge. A very worn dirty gray rug is on the floor, matted with cat hairs; several throw rugs which Minnie made out of various pieces of colored material are also on the floor. Neither dog nor cat are house-broken and the odor is very apparent. An old fashioned piano almost covered with photographs of family and friends, is the main piece of furniture of this room. When Anna is at home she is usually playing on it; Minnie also gets much pleasure out of it, particularly when her church friends come to see her. They gather around and lustily sing hymns to the accompaniment of the piano. On the same side of the room, against the wall, are a [settee?] and arm chair to match. These are upholstered in dark blue velvet and are usually covered with cat and dog hairs.

On the other side of the room to a flat topped desk, and a covered typewriter stands on a small table. A radio in on the desk. A rack contains several books, among which is Florida In the Making. The Life of Jesus Christ. City Directory, Dictionary and a good sized Bible; also fashion magazines, movie magazines and church pamphlets.

"I guess you know Tom ain't with the furniture company any more. After he had that last eye operation, they realized his sight was awful poor, in spite of his tryin to keep 'em from knowin, and they put him on half time - guess they were afraid he'd have an accident or something - then later they let him off altogether.

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Times have been pretty hard since then, and we're glad we have a roof over our heads and that the place is paid for. A friend of Tom's in Jacksonville, has given him a start in building up a business like he has in Jacksonville, that is, to locate and repossess cars for out-of-town finance companies. I don't know where Tom could get a job now, so he's mighty glad to try this. I do so wish I could get out and work myself," continued Minnie, wistfully, "but at my age, I don't know who'd have me or what I could do, only take care of somebody's children."

Martha entered the room in time to hear her mother's last words. "Some chance you'd stand to get a job, when I can't even get one," said Martha, who was wearing a well fitted black dress, and a new permanent in her hair. She is extremely thin, with blue eyes and light brown hair, and is very pale when her face is not rouged. "I's goin over to Mary's house with her and if you need somethin from the store, I'll bring it back with me."

"I need a great many things but have just a little change," replied Minnie. "Bring some beans and salt pork; I'll bake some biscuits and that will have to do for supper. I never cook at noon time; we just go in and take a bite of whatever we can find, which ain't never very much, and drink some coffee."

"There's no soap in the house," said Martha.

"Well, bring a 5¢ bar then," answered her mother. Martha and 7 her girl friend then left.

"I declare Martha gets thinner every day and the doctor said she should have good nourishing food, but we just can't get it with no one workin in the family, and even if we

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could she'd be afraid of gettin fat. About all she studies is clothes. Laura ought to have a different diet, too. She's forever havin boils and carbuncles.

“Our main food is beans, grits, potatoes, cabbage, light bread, very little meat, except once in a while, hamburger. But it's the best I can do with the little money I have to spend on the table. When Tom had a steady salary he give me \$5.00 a week for groceries—then if I needed extra money, I'd have to ask him for it. He doesn't much like to give money for the house. I don't never buy milk, only canned, for the coffee, altho we all need milk. Tom always handles the money, says he saves what he can after payin the bills. When Christmas comes or on my birthday, he gives me a few extra dollars to go buy a dress. ‘Lizbeth, too, sends me a few dollars at that time and tells me to spend it on myself, but I kinder hate to do that, altho I do need some clothes. But Anna has to look nice goin to High School so she gets about all I can scrape together.

“As soon as Gene gets a job, he and Martha will leave again—he don't like livin here much—only when they haven't got any money.

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“Well, soon Laura'll be married, and I's glad Billy is different from Gene. Billy told me that if he ever gets to where he can't support Laura, he might let her come home until he got another job, but he'd never come in and live off of us. And too, he said he wouldn't get married until he had \$200 saved up. He is a radio operator on a boat. They are plannin to get married in about six weeks. They will have a church weddin and I want you to be sure and come. Mrs. Virginia Brandt Berg is goin to perform the ceremony. Billy is goin to give Laura the money to have her a lovely white satin wedding dress made. This quilt I's makin now is for their wedding present. Come on in my room and I'll show you somethin Grandma Warner sent down from Georgia.”

Following Minnie as she pushed aside the drapery which separates the rooms, we stepped into the next room which is almost dark as there is a room on either side of it. A large

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dining table and chairs of mahogany practically fill this room. The table is piled up with boxes, clothing, and other articles. To the right is a small bed-room with one tiny window and a door.

"I give Martha and Gene this room as it's the only room in the house with a door to it. Tom built this room for 'Lizabeth when she became sixteen. She was so dissatisfied with things, especially havin her younger sisters pile up junk on the beds, so Tom put a door on the room so she could keep it locked. 'Lizabeth worked in Grants then. She always was more 'high-minded' than 9 the rest of us and seemed ashamed to bring her friends home. She didn't even want me to go to her school entertainments because I ain't pretty and got fine clothes. All my girls sure are good dressers, especially 'Lizabeth. It wasn't very long before she took a room with a girl friend as she and her daddy couldn't get along, once she grow up. It worried me a lot at first, but I'd go to see her, and she'd come here once in a great while, if her daddy wasn't home."

A three-quarter bed and Ivory painted dresser just about fill up this room. Both are badly in need of scrubbing. Several boxes and bags are piled up in the corner. The cat was sound asleep on the bed. Ragged muslin curtains hang in limp folds at the one window which is not screened.

To the left of the dining room is the bed-room occupied by Minnie and Tom, the husband. A cretonne curtain is hung across the doorway. This room has a large wooden double bed, dresser and chiffonier painted ivory, also a chair to match. When new, this furniture must have been an expensive set. Tom obtained most of the furniture in the house very cheap, while working for the furniture store; also some very pretty electric fixtures that look out of place in this dreary, ill-kept house. A small table contains a Bible and several large medical books.

"I bought these medical books several years ago, out of my house money—they're all paid for now. Tom wouldn't never have 10 let me buy them, but they come in handy many a

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time—I am great for home remedies. Can't afford to call a doctor every time some body gets sick.”

Minnie showed me the Catholic Bible with great pride. “Now I'll tell you about how I come by this Bible,” she said. “One day a woman come around sellin them - I never had a Catholic Bible in my hands before and course, I was real interested. She said I could buy it on very easy payments, so I took it and didn't let Tom or the girls know nothin about it. Well, I made the payments alright until Tom got out of work, than it was impossible for me to pay any more—I just couldn't do it. I hated to lose the three dollars I'd already paid, but it couldn't be helped. There was still \$2.00 more to be paid. Well, I wrapped it up very carefully, dressed and went down-town to the store that's very near to the Gesu Church where they sell all sorts of Holy statues and rosaries and books. I went in and laid the book up on the counter; the sales lady there said, ‘Well, what do you want?’ I said, ‘Well I's sorry, but I'll have to turn this Bible back to you, much as I hate to give it up. I am askin that if it is possible, please let some person who wants one very much, have it for the balance of what I owe; then I'll feel that my three dollars I've already paid on it was spent for a good purpose.’

“The woman didn't even open the package, but picked it up, handed it back to me, and said, ‘Well, that person has it right 11 now, and you needn't pay another cent.’ Well, I sure was happy and thanked her for it. When I got home, I showed the Bible to Tom. Of course, he was not surprised at me, for I am always doin things like that. Well, I sure think a heap of this Bible. When the girls have a lot of company chattering away in the front room, I can take my Bible into my room where its quiet and enjoy myself, just sittin there readin it.”

A very small bath-room adjoins Minnie's bedroom. Until several years ago, an outside toilet was used, and a hand water-pump. Tom did most of the work himself, with the exception of the plumbing.

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"You must excuse the disorder of my room," said Minnie [apologetically?]. "I always tell the girls to leave my room as I like to make it up myself, just whenever I feel like it. Some days I don't get around to it on account of company comin in." Everything was topsy-turvy, the bed un-made, covers rolled up and various pieces of clothing scattered about the bed and chair. "I've got so few sheets, I let the young couple have mine and I ain't got enough to go round." She smiled, "Tom don't never want to spend money on sheets and such. He don't mind [planking?] down \$2 on a horse at a bookie joint but I guess that's a real pleasure to him. House-keepin ain't never bothered me much anyhow.

"Now here is what my dear old mother up in Georgia sent to Laura," said Minnie as she proudly displayed a box containing flat 12 silver, which she said was at least 150 years old? "Mother is 80 years old now and you'd be surprised at how she is still so active. The first time she had to go to the hospital was when she was 70 years old, she had to be operated on for appendicitis. She come thru just fine—the doctors all said it was just marvelous. Dad is aging fast tho, and I believe they'll have to sell the farm soon. They're there all alone, exceptin' just one helper, a man. They just hate to give it up. I want them to sell out and come down here to live with us. Mother ain't never reconciled herself to the fact that I didn't marry a rich man. I was the only child. I was born in Syracuse, N. Y. but I can only remember Georgia as that's where I was raised; 10 miles out of Quitman, Ga. I finished the eighth grade in school. I was very anxious for my girls to finish High School but none of 'em have so far; it's up to Anna now to finish. She is takin typing and we hope she'll get a job in an office when she finishes school, that is, if she don't run off and get married before that time.

"I met Tom back home and after we got married we come to Miami and have been here ever since. Two years ago, Tom let me make a trip home and he took his vacation in Cuba. He's got friends over there who used to live in Miami—Cubans. That's how come he went to Cuba for his eye operation. An eye specialist there got interested in his case, and gave his services very reasonable. Of course, I'd a lot rather have had him here in Miami

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where I could've taken care of him, but these friends took good care of him, I reckon, 13 anyway that's the way Tom wanted it and he was the one to decide.

"I've always believed in a man bein' the boss especially about his pleasures and his politics. Tom always votes the Democratic ticket but I don't take much stock in women votin. Of course, if it's anything very important and Tom wants me to, I vote like he tells me to but I ain't what you might call a lover of politics. I always skip that part of the newspaper. When I've read the society news and the funnies, I read the church news then quit.

"I've tried so hard to get Tom and the girls to my way of thinkin about religion—I'd be so happy to have him come to church with me. No, I don't go to any particular church or denomination. I go to all the churches and study the different ways of worshiping God. But I do love to hear Mrs. Berg preach down at the Church of the Open Door—I reckon she is my favorite. She promised to come here to the reception after she performs the ceremony for Laura."

As it was quiet in the house, we could hear the sound of rats running across the ceiling.

"Do the rats come down in the rooms?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, they're not even afraid of the cat now—if we leave any bread or food around, it is eat up by morning. We have to put everything in the stove or ice-box. We only take ice in the real 14 hot weather, so we store things in the ice box."

Toward the back of the house, next to the dining room is another small room with only a double bed and one chair. This is a cheap iron bed, originally painted white, but very little paint left on it now. Dresses are hung up against the walls on wire hangers. Clothes are strewn on the chair and bed, and the room is a picture of cluttered disorder.

The sound of someone entering made us go back into the front room.

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"Oh, it's Laura and daddy," exclaimed Minnie. "Laura is a big help to her daddy and drives around with him a great deal. We don't keep a car of our own, but Tom usually has one to use in this repossession business."

Laura is a rather attractive girl, in spite of her freckled face. She is very small, has pretty blue eyes, brown hair which is always fixed up-to-date in curls and swirls. "Laura started to study to be a hairdresser, but she's not a girl who likes to go out and work; she'd rather stay at home and just now her daddy needs her anyway."

Tom is a man of medium height, well mannered, and wears very thick, rimmed glasses. What stands out more than anything else is the soiled, perspired white shirt that looked as tho it had been worn a week or more, and I wondered why, with four women in 15 the house, he should not have a fresh, clean shirt. Tom sat down at his desk to do some writing and just at this time Martha returned from the store.

"Gene not back yet?" she exclaimed. "Maybe he landed that job!"

"Well, I sure hope he did," replied her mother. "Lord knows some one will have to get a job around here soon or I don't know what we'll all do."

"Come back in the kitchen with me while I put on these beans," said Minnie. I followed her thru the dining room, bedroom and into the kitchen. The furnishings of this room consist of an almost new three-burner kerosene stove with side oven, an ice-box, and cabinet, once painted white but now dirty with most of the paint chipped off, a small white wooden table, several mismatched chairs, and dingy linoleum on the floor.

Evidently some one had been ironing as the board was stretched between the table and the cabinet with the iron still standing on it. "I'll put this away first, cause Tom gets so mad with the girls, forever pressin their dresses; it takes so much electric to heat the iron for just one or two things at a time the way they do. He threatened to have the electric cut off."

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Hastily Minnie put the board into a corner and the iron on the kitchen cabinet, turning it over to cool.

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"We eat right in here unless we've got company, and that ain't often. It's too much trouble to take all the things off the dining table, besides we all hardly ever eat at one time. The girls don't stay home much and besides they ain't never very hungry. Fraid of gettin fat."

A door on the right leads to a side-porch upon which are Maytag Electric washing Machine and a large old fashioned rocker. Over-filled garbage cans, papers, trash of all kinds litter up the yard near this porch, giving the impression that things are just thrown out of the door.

"You know Tom stays home a lot more at night than he used to," began Minnie as she washed the beans and salt pork. "You'll be surprised to hear I've learned to play cards, much as I dislike it, and now we play nearly every night. We played Bingo until two o'clock this mornin; Laura, Billy, Tom and I. It's really against my religious principles but I feel like the Lord will forgive me when I play for the purpose of keeping my husband at home. You've got to do somethin to hold 'em and I sure don't believe in divorce under any circumstances. I can play 'rummy' too, but not so good. Tom loves to play cards and used to stay out all hours of the night. Often he'd drink too, and I's so against liquor of any kind. Since this last eye operation, he don't drink at all; the doctor told him there ain't nothin worse for him than liquor. Only one time since last summer has he gone off on a drinkin spell.

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Then some friend treated him to some beer, he said, and that got him started. He came home about 3 a. m. and started to rave and carry on so I had to call Mr. Brown, next door, to come and help me get him to bed. He wanted to get in the car and go out again but we managed to keep him in. Since then he's been fine and I pray the Lord it is the last time."

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"Daddy wants some coffee,' called Martha.

"There's some left in the percolator from breakfast, I'll heat that in a minute," answered Minnie.

"Will you have a cup of coffee?" she asked me as she lifted a smoked covered percolator and shook it to estimate the amount of coffee in it.

"No thank you, I don't believe I care for any," I replied.

Pretty soon, Anna, the youngest, walked in. She is more robust and healthy looking than the rest of the family. She has brown hair and eyes, turned up nose, rather a pretty face, and a fine figure.

"Anna's got a steady beau," said Minnie proudly, as she eyed her youngest, "but daddy doesn't approve. He said she must finish school before she runs off and marries. Jack is crazy about Anna and bought her a watch, but daddy made her give it back to him. He comes here in his cut-down Ford roadster and they go to a movie 18 occasionally or sometimes [,?] they sit on the bench by the hibiscus bush and court. I don't care much for movies and hardly ever go. Tom goes sometimes, and of course the girls go, but I'd rather do my going to church."

At this point I told Minnie I'd have to be going.

"Now, be sure to come to the weddin," she said as we walked thru the house. "You'll get an announcement. We're sendin 'em to everybody we know; we want the church to be filled. After the ceremony, we're goin to have a reception at home here and I want you all to be sure to come."

"Well, I'll certainly be there," I assured her as she walked down the steps with me.

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“See this here large fern and those over there?” pointing to several ferns planted in wash-tubs. “I would like to sell these; if you know of anybody wantin some, please send them here, will you?” said Minnie.

Assuring her that I would, I continued along the stone walk and passed thru the Australian pines to the street.